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A VISION FOR THE
UPPER ILLINOIS RIVER WATERSHED

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A Vision for the Upper Illinois River Watershed

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The Upper Illinois River Watershed is a special place where the threads of private, public and non-profit partnerships are woven into the regional fabric of economic vitality; environmental stability, and social responsibility. Through its cultural heritage, the legacy of land stewardship, integrated with respect for personal property rights, continues. Natural resources are restored and sustained within a healthy mosaic of fields, forests, farms, woodlands, wetland prairies, pastures, cities, and naturally flowing streams. It is an incubator for green energy, entrepreneurial, educational and environmental initiatives.

Keywords: Illinois River Watershed, Vision, Water Quality, Watershed Conditions

THE NEED FOR A VISION

The Illinois River is a source of aesthetic beauty, recreational opportunities, aquatic life and refuge, and agricultural, industrial and residential water supply to some communities in northwest Arkansas. These uses are influenced by a myriad of processes and factors, including effluent discharges, land use and management, and other human activities within the Upper Illinois River Watershed. The stakeholders within this watershed need to have a broad understanding of the water quality conditions as observed today, and they need to have a vision for what water quality in this river and its tributaries will be 25 years from now. This watershed is front and center to many political, scientific and legal debates over water quality, but these debates can result in a fractured vision for the Upper Illinois River Watershed (UIRW). However, a common vision among all living, working, and recreating within the watershed is an essential first step to development of an overarching and effective watershed management plan (WMP) for the UIRW.

Why a Vision?

Without a vision, the people perish (Proverbs 29:18). Without a vision, people and their places

perish, because they have no direction. Aristotle said the mind thinks in pictures. Creating a vision, a picture, a portrait of the desired future, permits the formulation of goals and strategies that help us move toward that desired outcome, e.g. improved water quality. A common, shared vision is critical to the process of watershed management.

How was this Vision Created?

The Illinois River Watershed Partnership (IRWP) is a not-for-profit organization working to protect and restore the Illinois River and its tributaries in Arkansas and Oklahoma. The IRWP Board encompasses a wide diversity of stakeholder interest areas including agriculture, business, conservation, construction, government and technical, research and education, and thus represents a diversity of opinions and motivations in the Upper Illinois River Watershed. The IRWP and its Board represent a microcosm of the various stakeholders within this watershed, which allowed the development of this vision.

On November 12, 2008, IRWP Board members gathered in a meeting house on Mt. Sequoyah, Fayetteville, Arkansas to create a common, shared vision—a word picture—of desired condi-

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tions in the Upper Illinois River Watershed 25 years in the future. The information provided by the attending board members was used to craft the vision statement below. There was considerable discussion about the meaning and intent of each of the phrases included in this vision statement, because each word and phrase is packed with information. This vision is unpacked so that interested individuals and organizations may better understand the desired conditions of the watershed and its people in the future.

What do the Vision Phrases Mean?

The Upper Illinois River Watershed is a special place. The Upper Illinois River watershed is a special place with incredible vistas, pastoral settings, a vibrant, growing economy, and a rich heritage and culture of arts and crafts. It is a place where its people acknowledge how important informed decisions and actions are in sustaining the quality of life within the watershed. There is a clear understanding that almost everyone lives “downstream” in the watershed, so what happens “upstream” has a direct bearing on everyone.

Threads of private, public and non-profit partnerships. Inclusive partnerships recognize that collective, cooperative, and collaborative relationships among the private, public, and nonprofit sectors are critical in attaining our vision. Private individuals, businesses, industry, and the agricultural community are engaged with the public municipalities, utilities, agencies, and tribes to implement voluntary practices and enforce regulations for a sustainable quality of life. Nonprofit organizations help forge and sustain links between public and private entities through facilitation, mediation, environmental education, and communication.

Regional fabric of economic vitality, environmental sustainability, and social responsibility. Economic vitality provides the financial resources

and jobs needed to sustain the environment. The natural environment provides not only environmental amenities that contribute to improved quality of life, but also goods and services to sustain the economy; individuals and communities assume responsibility for the consequences of their actions so that everyone enjoys the benefits and opportunities available in the watershed. The flow of goods, services, jobs, information, and financial resources throughout the region and beyond sustains an improved quality of life experienced in every community. These interactions are planned and monitored to ensure they remain a positive force in the watershed. Awareness of the connections among economy, environment, and society is pervasive.

Through its cultural heritage, the legacy of land stewardship. The Illinois River watershed has a rich cultural heritage and diversity, where each culture contributes its unique legacy of stewardship with the land. Native American, African-American, European, Asian, Central and South American, and Marshall Island heritages all have a stewardship ethic for the land and its natural resources. Conservation, reuse, recycling, and renewal of natural resources are all part of this legacy. This stewardship ethic is passed from generation to generation.

Integrated with respect for personal property rights, continues. The Ozark Mountain perspective of independence and respect for personal property rights is recognized and preserved as well as a sense of fellowship and inter-relationship among individuals and communities that leads to greater understanding and trust within the watershed. Differences are appreciated and respected and contribute to broader and more informed perspectives on every issue – social, economic, and environmental.

Natural resources are restored and sustained. The Illinois River and its tributaries have been

restored, watershed best management practices have been implemented, green infrastructure has been renewed, water quality standards have been attained, and the natural resources in the watershed are being sustained. Wildlife, fisheries, bird communities, wildflowers and other natural resources contribute to the natural amenities of the region, enhancing landowner property values, tourism, and outdoor recreational experiences.

Healthy mosaic of fields, forests, farms, woodlands, wetland prairies, pastures, cities, and free flowing streams. The diversity of land cover and land use is managed and maintained based on the most up-to-date science, balancing individual property rights and the public good. Planned urban/suburban developments coexist with family and corporate farms, free flowing streams, woodlands, industrial parks, and wetland prairies. Trails and green infrastructure anchor this mosaic firmly on the landscape.

Incubator for green energy, entrepreneurial, educational, and environmental initiatives. There is a healthy, dynamic tension between tradition and innovation within the watershed that makes it an incubator for entrepreneurs to create high technology, low-impact, green solutions for environmental and energy problems. This is a place where better ideas and

approaches are formulated to improve public awareness, education, and outreach, and where people eight to eighty are excited about the vision and possibilities for the future within the Illinois River watershed.

FROM VISION TO IMPLEMENTATION

The Vision created here provides the word picture of what the Upper Illinois River Watershed will look like in 25 years, following the implementation of the WMP. This Vision not only eloquently describes conditions of the Illinois River, its tributaries and its watershed, but it also represents the interactions, feelings and aspirations of the stakeholders within the UIRW as the WMP moves forward.

The diversity of opinions and motivations present within the IRWP Board were used to create this Vision, showing that a common goal exists among the many groups of stakeholders within the UIRW. The common goal of this Vision needs to be remembered as the stakeholders move from the development of management strategies within the WMP to its implementation. The diversity of stakeholders within this watershed is a strength, as each stakeholder is part of the solution to improve water quality within the Illinois River and its tributaries.

